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Many Sask. seniors feeling like they are 'in jail' during pandemic, study finds

‘We’re seeing a lot of people talking about wanting to die’: geriatric psychiatrist

Cory Coleman · CBC News · Posted: Nov 06, 2020 12:00 PM CT | Last Updated: November 6, 2020

Researchers from Saskatchewan Polytechnic interviewed participants three times throughout the spring. Early results show some seniors are coping well, but many are facing challenges with loneliness, anxiety and low mood. (Donna Carreiro/CBC)

comments

A research project by Saskatchewan Polytechnic has found many seniors are experiencing a range of emotional and social challenges during the pandemic.

The project began in the spring with researchers finding 40 Saskatchewan residents aged 60 and older who had experienced challenges with physical distancing and social isolation during the early stages of the pandemic.

Researchers interviewed participants three times throughout the spring. Early results show some seniors are coping well, but many are facing challenges with loneliness, anxiety and low mood because of changes in their routine, not being able to visit with friends and family, and lack of regular exercise.

"People were saying they felt trapped. People were saying they felt like they were in jail, so it was a really challenging time," Heather Nelson, research chair of the study, told CBC's *The Morning Edition*.

'Give them choice'

Sandra Svoboda said her mom — who has end-stage Alzheimer's and lives in a retirement residence — has experienced "a significant decline" since COVID-related protocols came in earlier this year.

She said her mom was more active, engaged with others and less agitated before physical distancing and visitation restrictions were implemented.

"I really do believe that this social disconnection has disproportionately affected the elderly," she told CBC's *Blue Sky*.

LISTEN: CBC Saskatchewan's Blue Sky explored the effects of isolation on older people during the pandemic

Blue Sky 46:01

What is the cost of isolation to older adults during the pandemic?

It's a delicate balance between keeping at-risk older adults safe from COVID-19 and not causing more mental and physical health problems because family members are cut off from loved ones in care. We heard some heartbreaking stories from family members who say pandemic protocols are robbing their family members of a decent quality of life. We spoke with Suellen Beatty, the CEO of Sherbrooke Community Centre and Dr. Lilian Thorpe, a geriatric psychiatrist working in Saskatoon. We also heard about the research of Dr. Jennifer Briere whose research involved matching students with older adults who need help learning how to use media for socialization and connection. 46:01

At one point, Svoboda could only talk to her mom from the patio of the care home while her mom was inside.

She said she can now take her mom to appointments and go into her mom's suite to see her, which has helped, but the visits are still confined to the suite.

"I'm not sure if she knows who I am. Some days she does ... But I do have a sense that she understands that I'm a safe person for her to be with, that I'm a significant person to her somehow," she said.

"I can sit with her and sing to her and I can hold her hand and I can touch her. It's a significant difference from beforehand."

Svoboda said being able to bring other family members could make an even bigger difference.

"I wish that I could bring my mother's great grandchildren there. They miss her terribly," she said.

'We're seeing a lot of people talking about wanting to die'

Dr. Lilian Thorpe, a geriatric psychiatrist in Saskatoon, said Svoboda's experience reflects the reality of many people who have loved ones in a care home or live in a care home.

"Some of them are dying with hardly having seen any family members for months and months," she said.

"We're seeing a lot of people talking about wanting to die, actually, because life is terrible and it doesn't look like it's getting better anytime soon and it's the social isolation that's driving that."

Thorpe said she has had to work long hours to help as many seniors as possible.

Multidisciplinary approach to protocol

Visitors are currently allowed at most care homes only for compassionate reasons, including supporting people in end-of-life care, major surgery, critical care, pediatrics, helping with care needs or for patients with specific challenges.

Anyone who visits a facility has to go through a health screening, including a temperature check and filling out a questionnaire. Visiting family members have to wash their hands going in and out of the facility, and wear a mask.

There have been concerns about the restrictions, however, because family members may not be allowed to help loved ones in care homes with basic needs.

- **'We're very, very sad': Saskatoon long-term care home CEO reacts to new restrictions due to high COV**

Svoboda said she understands the importance of physical distancing and other protocols to minimize the spread of the virus, but that the negative effects needs to be taken into consideration.

"From what I'm seeing with my mom and others, depriving her of those social relationships — the emotion, the words, the connection — while trying to contain the virus, I think it's detrimental psychologically and physically."

Svoboda said she wants to see a multidisciplinary approach to decisions about COVID-19 visitation restrictions.

- **'I don't feel like a person': Sask. long-term care resident says COVID restrictions affecting mental**

She said she would like to see geriatricians, psychiatrists, physiotherapists and caregivers involved in the decision making process. She also wants family members to have a say.

She said there needs to be more conversations about how care homes can keep residents and staff safe, while still ensuring seniors can stay connected with their loved ones.

Svoboda said she's happy with the staff at her mom's care home, but her mom's quality of life is "very, very different" than it was before pandemic protocols were implemented.

"Give them choice. Give them opportunity. Give them back [their] quality of life."

Stay busy, stay connected

The research project outlines several tips for seniors to help maintain their physical and mental health during the pandemic: regular exercise, engaging in hobbies, communicating with friends, using family as support, staying engaged with church and community groups, volunteering, keeping a regular routine and reaching out for help when needed.

"We heard a lot of people engaging in hobbies they hadn't done in years," said Nelson.

"A lot of seniors actually did virtual coffee and virtual gatherings, and some of them learned technology that they hadn't done prior to COVID, so that was a really good thing for lots of people."

Nelson said some of the pandemic-related challenges around isolation may increase during the winter.

"Those of us [who] aren't seniors need to think about our senior relations and our senior friends and contact them more often, knowing that they are probably more isolated than some of the rest of us."

This story was told in part thanks to people who filled out CBC Saskatchewan's COVID questionnaire. We want to tell more stories about how the pandemic is touching the province's most vulnerable and marginalized populations. How has COVID-19 affected you? Share your story.

With files from CBC Radio One's The Morning Edition and Blue Sky

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